DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 852 CS 501 302

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TITLE Whither Genre? (Or, Genre Withered?).
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 11p.; Study prepared at Wayne State University

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Analytical Criticism; Higher Education; Historical Criticism; *Literary Criticism; *Literary Genres; Literary History; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism; Speeches

ABSTRACT

Recently, genre studies have become increasingly important in the area of rhetorical criticism. This method of analysis is based on the assumption that rhetorics vary situationally, like situations will produce like rhetorics, antecedent rhetorical events significantly affect the creative product, and analogy is more important than anomaly when assessing the relationship between two or more rhetorics. Subject areas most suited to the genre method are those in which seemingly separate rhetorical events culminate naturally into a single thematic strand. This type of analysis is actually not at odds with traditional ("single event") critical methods. Rather, as an outgrowth of traditional criticism, genre study is justified because it is most likely to promote the advancement of rhetorical criticism, cross cultural and historical lines, and illuminate the situationally similar strategies and tactics which produce rhetorics. (KS)

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Whither Genre? (Or, Genre Withered?)

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This paper isolates assumptions underlying the genre model of criticism, sets forth criteria for choosing genres, and offers justifications for the genre model as a critical tool.

CS 501 302

Whither Genre? (Or, Genre Withered?)

In the words of Professor Gronbeck's announcement of this program, genre studies "have filled the journals. . .in recent years." Certainly "filled" is a relative term, and there are those who might argue with the quality of the "filler." But it cannot be denied that critics of public address have moved away from their traditional speaker-speech-audience model. Perhaps weary of producing biography and perusing argumentative structure, critics began to turn to movement and campaign studies. No doubt, some measure of stimulation came from Black's analysis of exhortative discourse,[1] Rosenfield's separate articles on analog criticism and critical discourse,[2] and Bitzer's probe into the nature of the rhetorical situation.[3] Now critics have begun to produce criticism employing what we might term the "genre" model. Indeed, journal readers and convention-goers have recently been treated and/or subjected to numerous accounts of "The Rhetoric of [insert 'Black Power,' 'Confrontation,' 'Women's Liberation,' 'Polarization,' etc.][4] All of this is, of course, well and good, but, lest the proliferation of "rhetorics of" continue unabated, some analysis must be made of the genre model itself.[5] As Robert Brooks noted at this conference two years ago, "some genres are juicier than others." The purpose of this paper is to isolate the assumptions underlying the genre model of criticism, set forth some criteria for assessing the juiciness of the genre, and offer some justifications for the genre model as a critical tool.

What do we mean when we say that a certain genre of rhetoric exists? Both offhand references to the "rhetoric of diplomacy" and scholarly articles such as Hart's "The Rhetoric of the True Believer"[6] share a common characteristic--they are reflective of persons who have a sense of genre. But a clear-cut definition of genre <u>qua genre</u> has yet to be posited.

The term "genre" itself connotes sameness in kind, type, or form. With reference to rhetoric, the term has been broadly used to encompass addresses which have similar characteristics.[7] We should, however, recognize the term "genre" in a specific sense, for it is derived from the Latin genus. Thus, particular addresses may be viewed as species of a genus (type of discourse). The genus or "genre" itself is an abstract concept, much like a "theory" is, embodying and articulating characteristics of the particular addresses which are present to some degree in each of the addresses. Brooks argues that genre studies provide "general or nearly lawful knowledge" and that "such knowledge is superior to the specific."[8] But genre studies must go beyond mere classification, for, as Northrop Frye writes, "the purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify. . .traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them."[9]

Several important assumptions seem to underlie the model of generic criticism. First, and probably foremost, is the key assumption that rhetoric is, by nature, situational. As Bitzer writes, ". . .the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity--and, I should add, of rhetorical criticism."[10] What Bitzer means by this is that rhetorical discourse is a response to the elements of exigence, audience, and constraints within a situation that invites rhetorical utterances. But critics must also realize, as Vatz has pointed out, that rhetorical discourse can create situations, for the framing of choices in language symbols--whether by speaker or by audience--may condition the nature of subsequent interactions among speaker and audience.[11] Thus rhetorical discourse may be both a response to an exigence and a creater of new exigences. In Consigny's "Rhetoric and Its Situations" a sensible resolution is made of the apparent controversy between Bitzer and Vatz wherein

a view of "topics" illustrates the interaction between rhetoric and situation. When, for example, William Pitt campaigned for repressive measures in England during the early 1790's, each of his speeches, supplemented by barrages of pro and con newspaper reporting, served to create in the minds of both partisans and opponents alike new exigences and constraints.[12] So the relationship between situation and rhetorical discourse is not uni-directional. Situations may produce a genre of rhetoric, such as mass media apologies, or a particular type of rhetoric, such as a campaign of repression, may produce a corresponding situation. A critic using the generic model must, then, be especially sensitive to the interaction between situation and rhetorical discourse.

A second assumption, which follows quite naturally from the first, is that like situations will tend to evince similar rhetorical discourse (and that similar rhetorical discourses may produce like situations). This is not to say that all eulogies or campaign speeches will be alike in the generic sense, but it is to say that the situational variables are somewhat similar. When it does occur that two or more eulogies resemble one another in a number of ways, it may be possible to describe a genre of discourse that embodies them. Such a genre would perhaps encompass other rhetorical discourses in which praise and blame are discussed and justified. The key principle here is that the genre, by definition, springs from similar instances of situation-rhetorical discourse interaction, not merely from the situation alone.

A third assumption--that of genric constraints--has been treated by Jamieson. In arguing for the influence of "antecedent rhetorical forms" upon the makers of rhetorical discourse, she remarks that "some rhetors are more constrained by genre than others because of their sense of the presentness of the past."[13] I would, of course, add to this the corollary that audiences and critics--the "consumers of rhetorical discourse--are also influenced by

antecendent forms. Indeed, the critic, as he relates similar situations and discourses, is in fact the creator of genres.

The fourth assumption of the genre model is that the critic who employs it (and perhaps the rhetorical theorist who embraces it) is more interested in the analogies inherent in rhetorical discourse than he is in the anomalies. To the extent that the critic is most interested in the interaction of "message" and "environment," to borrow Rosenfield's terms,[14] this is so. But it must be remembered that the positing of characteristics for a given genre does not end all inquiry regarding the nature of that genre. Rather, the existence (or coming to be) of an anomalous form within a given genre should cause the critic to reassess the abstract principles of the genre itself. The properties of the anomaly may suggest modifications in the principles of the genre or they may serve as a base upon which to posit a separate, distinct genre. To be sure, generic criticism is not an exercise which consists of fitting new phenomena to predetermined "pigeonholes;" it is an activity which consists of the determination of different kinds of broad categories of rhetorical discourse and situations.

Given these four assumptions of the genre model, one might logically ask, "How does one find a genre?" and "How does a critic who uses the genre model proceed?" When Rosenfield's piece comparing George Wallace and Patrick Henry appeared in print some years ago, one anti-genre wag declared that he now understood the generic method of criticism. "Put all the orators of history into a hat," he said, "and then pick any two!" Nor should the critic simply "compare" two discourses which seem to bear some similarity to each other, especially if that similarity is manifest in the speaker's purpose.

You may be both amused and amazed at my answer to the questions. The critic begins to use the generic method by not using the generic method!

He begins by a detailed examination and analysis of a single rhetorical event. The critic may employ any one of a variety of critical perspectives--the traditional, the experiential, or one derived from the "new rhetorics."[15] Only when that examination and analysis are complete should the critic begin his search for similar rhetorical events. Only when those seemingly similar rhetorical events are examined and analyzed as singular occurences can the critic begin to speculate about the existence of a genre. For instance, Pitt's campaign for repressive measures, which has been alluded to earlier, led me to a separate look at Abraham Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus during the Civil War. Then I examined suspensions of habeas corpus and denials of due process in Northern Ireland and India. These separate examinations, and the subsequent combining of the conclusions thereof had turned up sufficient similarities to posit the existence of a genre I termed the "rhetoric of repression." To be sure, I had found a "juicy genre." Let me be clear about this. The genre is juicy only when the situations that invite discourse are, in themselves, similar. For it is from historical analogs that rhetorical analogs spring. And generic criticism proceeds only from rhetorical analogs.

After the critic has determined that similar situations have produced generally similar rhetoric or vice versa, he must seek to define the nature and extent of those similarities found in the rhetorical discourse. Rosenfield suggests that the critic's task is two-fold: "to specify the fundamental anatomical features which relate the two speeches (engage in a factorial analysis of the category of apologetic discourse exemplified by the messages) and to assess the relative artistic merit of each speech, compared to the other."[16] Karlyn Campbell expresses the thought that the critic must "discover. . . basic stylistic and philosophical judgments" indigenous to that genre of rhetorical discourse.[17] Ware and Linkugel isolate the factors of verbal

self-defense and go on to detail the postures of rhetorical self-defense. Raum and Measell detail message and non-message variables which characterize the genre of polarization. These studies, and others like them, do that which genre studies must do, namely, treat speeches as forms and isolate the distinctive argumentative structures and stylistic attributes which give the genre its shape. The four factors or "strategies" of verbal self-defense--denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence--are tantamount to argumentative forms.[18] The message tactics of polarization, use of concrete description and the copula, are refinements of Black's view of exhortation,[19] and they embrace both concepts of argument and of style.[20]

Having examined the assumptions which underlie the genre model and having put forth some criteria for judging the worth of the genre, we turn now to a brief look at some justifications of generic criticism as a critical tool. First, and perhaps foremost, I see genre studies as an outgrowth of traditional studies rather than a repudiation of them. The strength of a genre and the test of its worth to scholars is a function of the evidence adduced to posit the existence of the genre. When that evidence is far-fetched, the genre will, necessarily, be a construct perhaps wholly in the mind of the critic. But, if the evidence is reasonable and the generalizations sound, the reader, like the critic, will see that the genre is real, not fanciful. Since they are outgrowths of traditional (or "single event") studies, genre studies may serve to vivify the study of singular rhetorical events.

Secondly, it seems to me that generic criticism, by its focus upon the similarities in rhetorical discourse, stands to contribute to the growth of rhetorical theory in a way that single-event criticisms just cannot do. Just as Aristotle's postulation of his three genera was predicated upon long observation, so too must our postulation of genres be based upon careful comparisons

and sound generalizations. When we isolate the strategy and tactics inherent in a given situation, we should be mindful of other similar situations so that the limits and effects of particular strategies can be assessed.

Lastly, generic criticism provides us with a way to cross historical (and perhaps even cultural) lines with a view to determining what happens when people speak to others in rhetorical situations. If the title of this paper caused you to stop and ponder whether or not you recalled an article with "whither" in the title, your thoughts are proof enough that genre criticism is here to stay.

Notes

[1]Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (New York: Macmillan, 1965), esp. Ch. V, "An Alternative Frame of Reference."

[2]Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "A Case Study in Speech Criticism: The Nixon-Truman Analog," Speech Monographs, 35 (November, 1968), 435-450 and "The Anatomy of Critical Discourse," Speech Monographs, 35 (March, 1968), 50-69.

[3]Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (Winter, 1968), 1-14.

[4]Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede, The Rhetoric of Black Power (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," QJS, 50 (October, 1969), 277-284; Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation," QJS, 59 (February, 1973), 74-86; Richard D. Raum and James S. Measell, "Wallace and His Ways: A Study of the Rhetorical Genre of Polarization," Central States Speech Journal, 25 (Spring, 1974), 28-35. For other "rhetorics of," see John F. Cragan, "Rhetorical Strategy: A Dramatistic Interpretation and Application," Central States Speech Journal, 26 (Spring, 1975), 4-5.

[5]There have been two noteworthy attempts in this direction--B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia," QJS, 59 (October, 1973), 273-283 and Robert D. Brooks, "An Alternative for Retention: Genre Studies and Speech Communication," unpublished paper read at Central States Speech Association Convention, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April, 1974--but neither affords a full articulation of the genre model of rhetorical criticism.

[6]Roderick P. Hart, "The Rhetoric of the True Believer," Speech Monographs, 38 (November, 1971), 249-261.

[7]For an analysis of genre criticism in this light, see Kathleen M. Hall Jamieson, "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 6 (Summer, 1973), 162-170.

[8]Brooks, p. 7.

[9]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 247-248.

[10]Bitzer, p. 7.

[11]Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 6 (Summer, 1973), 154-161. For a study dealing with the clash of Bitzer's and Vatz's views, see Scott Consigny, "Rhetoric and Its Situations," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 7 (Summer, 1974), 175-186.

[12]James S. Measell, "William Pitt and Suspension of Habeas Corpus," QJS, 60 (December, 1974),

[13]Jamieson, pp. 162, 165.

[14]Rosenfield, "The Anatomy of Critical Discourse," p. 58.

[15]For an excellent survey of critical methods, see Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

[16]Rosenfield, "A Case Study in Speech Criticism: The Nixon-Truman Analog," p. 435.

[17]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1972), p. 37.

[18]Ware and Linkugel, pp. 275-282.

[19]Black, p. 143.

[20]Raum and Measell, pp. 29-33.